

Understanding chemsex beyond risk: Psychosocial correlates and substance use patterns in Australia

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Introduction: Sexualised substance use (chemsex) is increasingly recognised as a public health issue, but remains inconsistently defined and often framed narrowly through risk-based perspectives. While evidence links chemsex to sexual health, psychosocial health, and substance-related harms, it also highlights diverse motivations, including pleasure, intimacy, and coping with minority stress. This study examines chemsex prevalence, psychosocial correlates, and substance use patterns among Australian gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey (N=401) assessed chemsex engagement, psychosocial and psychosexual factors, and substance use patterns. Descriptive statistics, bivariate analyses, and logistic regression models were used to examine demographic and psychosocial correlates of recent (past 12 months) chemsex engagement, including polysubstance combinations and perceived associations with chemsex.

Results: Overall, 59.9% of participants reported lifetime chemsex engagement (44.6% in the past 12 months). Demographic variables were not significantly associated with recent chemsex. Psychosocial modelling identified higher drug-taking confidence (OR=1.028, $p<.001$) and lower sex positivity (OR=0.641, $p=.028$) as correlates. Chemsex was characterised by substantial polysubstance use, with participants reporting a mean of 2.9 substances per session. Common substances included poppers (72.6%), methamphetamine (57.5%), and cannabis (42.5%), with frequent combinations such as methamphetamine and poppers (39.7%). Participants reported varied perceptions of what constitutes chemsex, beyond traditionally defined substances.

Discussions and Conclusions: Chemsex is a prevalent and heterogeneous practice shaped by psychosocial factors and complex substance combinations. The absence of strong demographic predictors support the importance of behavioural and contextual determinants. The variability in substance definitions underscores the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive conceptualisations.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: Interventions should move beyond risk-only frameworks by incorporating pleasure, agency, and context to support culturally competent, community-informed approaches that reflect the diversity of chemsex experiences. Harm reduction strategies must address polysubstance use and support informed decision-making.

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